New Age: The Politics of Promise

Scholar and publisher Mitch Horowitz surveys the history of alternative spirituality in America

by Kimberly Winston | Sep 28, 2009

Mitch Horowitz is the author of Occult America: The Secret History of How Mysticism Shaped Our Nation (Bantam, Sept.) and editor-in-chief at Penguin/Tarcher, which has a significant New Age list. PW recently asked him to explain the tangled relationship of New Age spirituality and American history and politics.

PW: Let's start with some definitions. What do we mean when we speak of “the occult” and “New Age”?

Mitch Horowitz: Occult is from the Latin occultus and it means “hidden” or “obscure.” So the occult refers to knowledge that is not necessarily readily available, but needs to be ferreted out to be understood. New Age, put simply, is therapeutic spirituality. New Age does not necessarily belong to any one faith or doctrine, and, in fact, a defining feature of New Age is that you can be a member of any religion, or no religion at all, and still participate in this therapeutic spirituality. One of the things I contend in the book is New Age philosophy stands on the shoulders of occultism. It grew out of the occult, as did many other religious ideas in America.

PW: What religious and political values characterize the New Age movement today?

MH: New Agers are very diverse, both geographically and demographically. But the belief systems they do seem to hold in common are liberal politics, the equality of all religions, body-mind healing and the principle that our thoughts to some extent can influence outer circumstances. They also believe that you can obtain spiritual understanding without belonging to a specific faith or religion, and there is a lack of emphasis on membership in a particular congregation or an allegiance to a particular doctrine. They move freely among religious movements and ideas, and believe that humans have some kind of intuitive faculty, and that it is possible for the mind to evolve to some kind of higher level. It is a theology, an ethics, a psychology and an outlook. In terms of politics, they tend to associate with various progressive political movements. And that is not a recent thing. Politics and esoteric spirituality grew up together in America. When Spiritualism began to sweep this country [in the 19th century], it created the first opening in the modern world for women to serve as religious leaders, in that case as trance mediums. So you had a tremendous crossover between the Spiritualist movement and the suffragettes and voting rights activism. This was a civic, spiritual movement that provided an opening for women both politically and religiously. New Age has always been reformist.

PW: You also write about the positive-thinking approach that characterizes much of the esoteric, or New Age, philosophy. Do you see a vein of that in the mood that brought President Obama into office?

MH: Yes. The positive-thinking approach is in the groundwater of our country. People who would never think of themselves as New Agers embrace the idea of positive or motivational thinking. This viewpoint arose partly out of transcendentalism. In 1870, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote an essay called Success in which he discussed the power of enthusiasm. That aspect of the American character is so basic it travels across all our religious or political lines. Barack Obama identified Emerson's essay Self-Reliance as an influence on him. This tone of positivism is a key part of American spirituality.

PW: In the book, you discuss various occult and New Age movements and groups that have found fertile soil in America. Is there something about our country that makes it especially hospitable to such movements?

MH: Absolutely. It has to do with both the nation's founding and its geography. In the 1600s, the Thirty Years' War decimated portions of Central Europe where a lot of religious experimentation was going on. It left many parts of Germany devastated. So you had people who were religious radicals and experimenters who felt the need to flee. At the same time, in the American colonies, William Penn had founded Philadelphia, which was known as a religiously liberal place and had a variety of religious groups living side by side—Mennonites, Quakers and radical offshoots of the Lutheran church. Word began to spread across the Atlantic, and certain sects and mystic groups started to migrate to the Philadelphia area and set up communities. They did so without harassment. As the decades unfolded into the 1700s, the American colonies developed a reputation as a safe harbor for people with radical religious ideas, including those with supernatural ideas. In Pennsylvania, there were communities devoted to esoteric Christian ideas, numerology and astrology. They survived, and this created a magnetic pull for religious radicals looking for a safe home. Then you had unusual geography in America. It was this vast nation whose government had moved Indian tribes off certain parcels of land, which it then opened to settlement. So there began a flow of people moving west and spreading out, and these people were relatively liberal religiously, and they were on their own. They might have had some affiliation to a specific religion or church, but it was hard to keep that together on the frontier; so many of them were ripe candidates for the new religious movements that were cropping up: Mormonism, Christian Science, Spiritualism. It was a magnetic, dynamic combination of ideas flowing to America and new folks flowing around in America willing to listen to fresh ideas. It made America into a laboratory for experimental religion and that has continued to the present day.

PW: Where do we feel the impact of these groups today?

MH: The New Age movement's greatest impact on American culture is found all across the religious landscape, from liberal religious movements to evangelicalism, in the expectation that religion should be therapeutic, that it should be a healing force. That was a radical idea a hundred years ago, and today it abounds. For example, the most popular media evangelist in America today is Joel Osteen. Every Sunday, his talks and homilies are about the power of positive thought, and when he does that, he is standing directly on the shoulders of the occult and New Age movements, which are founded on the belief that our minds can shape outer circumstances. That idea began in this country in the mid-19th-century as the “mental healing” movement, and today it is a basic part of the most popular media ministry in the country. Osteen couches the message in biblical language, not the magical language that was coming out of the mental healing movement, but there is a direct bloodline from that earlier movement to him. So both the New Agers and the evangelicals are steeped in practical spirituality. Positive thinking began as an occult idea and became a New Age idea, and it represents the occult's most lasting impact on our culture.

Now, in terms of politics, Freemasonry played a real and positive role in influencing the growth of religious tolerance and liberty in early America. In the 1700s, Freemasonry embraced the principle that different faiths could flourish within a single nation, and it had the allegiance of some of the founding fathers, including George Washington, Benjamin Franklin and John Hancock. Freemasons endorsed the idea that America was beginning a “new order of the ages,” was breaking from the sectarianism of the Old World. Masons believed that in this new republic the spiritual search was entirely a matter of the individual's conscience. And I think that idea became established in the firmament of the colonies and continues to find renewal in this country through other religious movements including the New Age movement, which builds on it. What's interesting is that even during the Bush era, a conservative Supreme Court upheld the rights of a Brazilian-based sect to use psychedelic drugs in its rituals. In 2007, a

consortium of Wiccan families in the military sued the Department of Veterans Affairs because they wanted the VA to recognize Wicca as an official religion and wanted fallen servicemen to be entitled to be buried with a pentagram on their headstone. After first resisting, the VA agreed. To me, this is a sign of America's success. We continue to be a place where people can be free to hold radical religious beliefs. It says something about the atmosphere of religious experimentation in our country, an atmosphere that is often fed by esoteric religions.

PW: What should publishers and booksellers bear in mind while serving the New Age audience?

MH: New Age readers demand practicality above all. They believe that religion should be a workable system of thought that can help them through life's challenges. So any publisher or writer who puts out a New Age book without defining its aim and its payoff to the reader will probably fail to find an audience. People do not have time to figure out a book's message. Of course, some people might shake their heads at that statement and say, “Isn't that shallow to demand that religious thought have a payoff?” But the truth is the transcendentalists were never afraid of saying what they wanted to get across to the reader. And in the early self-help field, consider titles like Think and Grow Rich and How to Win Friends and Influence People. I want New Age publishing to take a leaf from the past and look at how the pioneers crafted their messages. They did so with great boldness and clarity and were never embarrassed to make a promise to the reader—as long as they believed in that promise. If you do not have a promise to make to the reader, it may be worth asking whether this book needs to be published.

What's New in New Age

New Age publishers are banking on established subjects such as Wicca, 2012, crystals and astrology to maintain reader enthusiasm this fall. But books on topics as diverse as the power of Ouija, communicating with the dead and the undocumented 19 years of Jesus' life should spark this already vibrant category. Here's a look at some of the season's new titles.

Coming from New World Library is an unusual new work from Eckhart Tolle, one of the genre's mainstays. The author of The Power of Now (three million copies sold) and A New Earth (the fastest-selling Oprah pick ever) has collaborated with artist Patrick McDonnell to create Guardians of Being, a book of lessons inhabited by McDonnell's Mutts characters. Says publicity director Monique Muhlenkamp, “The cast of characters from the Mutts comic strip charmingly illustrate Tolle's profound statements and lessons on staying in the present moment.”

Another New Age moneymaker is the 2012 phenomenon. As December 21, 2012 nears, publishers are turning out more and more material focused on the alleged impending apocalypse. Even Columbia Pictures is hoping to cash in on the topic: in November the studio will premiere its $200 million 2012, with a starry cast headed by John Cusack, Woody Harrelson and Amanda Peet. According to Tarcher editor-in-chief Mitch Horowitz, Mayan scholar John Major Jenkins has been dubbed “the founding pioneer of the 2012 subgenre.” Jenkins's The 2012 Story: The Myths, Fallacies, and Truth Behind the Most Intriguing Date in History claims to offer historical perspective and a clear path through the confusion surrounding the mythology. “John Major Jenkins is perhaps the only widely published 2012 theorist today who probes the meaning and philosophy that the ancient Maya themselves brought to the question of 2012,” says Horowitz, who claims that Jenkins's book debunks the doomsday prophesizing.

2012 and Beyond: An Invitation to Meet the Challenges & Opportunities Ahead by Diana Cooper (Findhorn, Jan.) will, says the publisher, “enable you to understand the ancient prophecies for 2012, what is expected to happen in that year and the incredible changes that will take place worldwide in the next 20 years.” Cooper is the principal of the Diana Cooper School of Angels and Ascension, which empowers others to spread the light of angels, ascension and the sacred mysteries of the universe, according to dianacooperschool.com.

The Maya aren't the only prognosticators still causing a stir in the genre. The Complete Prophecies of Nostradamus by Mario Reading (Sterling/Watkins) offers a major re-evaluation of Nostradamus's prophecies. According to the publisher, the groundbreaking new analysis reveals the true key in determining the dates of the great seer's predictions.

Sterling Innovation's Ouija Answer Book: Look into the Future. Have Fun! will also guide readers into the unknown. The publisher claims the book works on the same principles as the board game: as you open the pages at random, your wishes will lead you to those that spell out your heart's desire.

In Red Wheel/Weiser's Fringe Dweller on the Night Shift: True Stories from an Afterlife Paramedic, author Monica Holy attempts to tackle the ultimate unknown: the afterlife. “I think people are interested in exploring the afterlife, whatever their belief system,” says publisher Jan Johnson. “They're more open [to the idea] that there may be more to reality than the physical world and its physical laws.” Holy's story revolves around the images her guidance asked to paint and then to relate the stories of mostly troubled, often young, nearly or newly dead people. Holy also works to connect these people to their loved ones and to bring back messages from the world beyond.

Another title that looks at the after-death experience is Journey to the Light: Find Your Spiritual Self and Enter into a World of Infinite Opportunity: True Stories from Those Who Made the Journey by George Noory and William J. Birnes (Forge). This November release compiles stories offered by listeners of Noory's overnight radio show, Coast to Coast AM, which is broadcast on some 500 stations and streamed over the Internet to millions of listeners. “These are stories of loved ones coming back from the other side to say a final good-bye, premonitions that saved people from certain death, angels who intervened in the lives of those whom they protect and ghosts trapped between worlds,” says executive editor Robert Gleason. “Love knows no bounds and can even transcend death itself—and that's the book's

message.”

Living Life as a Thank You: The Transformative Power of Daily Gratitude (Viva, Nov.) also argues that spiritual transformations are possible. Rather than communicating with the dead, Mary Beth Sammons's work asserts that being thankful for the positives in our lives can put an end to the worst downward spirals. One of the Living Life stories, says associate publisher Brenda Knight, “centers on Alan Kaufman, one of today's top fiction writers, poets and essayists. He was in a major downward spiral with drugs, alcohol and rage and was at death's door when he began using gratitude as a prayer. As a counselor every day, he now saves the lives of others facing addiction. He teaches them emotional gratitude.”

Gratitude is the focus of Sterling/Hearst's Blessings: Reflections on Gratitude, Love and What Makes Us Happy by the editors of Good Housekeeping, in which 35 top-selling writers reveal their most profound moments of gratitude to remind readers just how lucky they are. Searching within one's self in order to find spiritual harmony is also the theme of Memories of the Afterlife: Life Between Lives, Stories of Personal Transformation edited by Michael Newton. According to Llewellyn acquisitions editor Carrie Obry, the title “collects 30 to 40 retrospective case studies written by... therapists from around the world that focus on the major benefits accessed by the client as a result of the therapeutic experience.”

The power of transformation, a popular New Age topic, is addressed in differing ways in two fall titles. Ed and Deb Shapiro's Be the Change: How Meditation Can Transform You and the World (Sterling/Ethos) features contributions from a number of diverse luminaries, including Ram Dass, Jane Fonda, Ellen Burstyn, the Dalai Lama, Dean Ornish and many others. For those seeking material transformations, I See Your Dream Job by Sue Frederick (St. Martin's) combines ancient mystical teaching with current career knowledge. “This is a book for anyone who feels stuck in a job, who has been laid off or fired and anyone who dreads Mondays,” claims executive editor Jennifer Enderlin. “It's for anyone who knows they should be doing something different but feels stuck.”

Scotalyn Press publisher and author Teena Booth believes the genre needs a transformation as a whole. She asserts that New Age titles cater not only to personal quests but to aid readers seeking ways to feel less alone in times of economic collapse, global warming and other “glaring failures of the old paradigm.” Her November title, Unfinished Evolution: How a New Age Revival Can Change Your Life and Save the World, can “reinvigorate [the category] and use [it] to build the social capital we need to finally usher in that long-awaited new paradigm,” she says.

The late John Michell's final work urges readers to contribute to universal harmony. In How the World Is Made: The Story of Creation According to Sacred Geometry (Inner Traditions), Michell argues that “people must incorporate sacred proportion into their lives,” says publisher Ehud C. Sperling. “He saw that the current alienation of modern humanity, the source of so much unhappiness, is aided and abetted by our abandonment of proportion. He knew that our loss of connection with the sacred had resulted in our inability to construct meaningful lives.”

Some publishers believe the spiritual answers their readers seek are hidden in history rather than in any “new paradigms.” When Jesus Lived in India: The Quest for the Aquarian Gospel: The Mystery of the Missing Years by Alan Jacobs attempts to recreate the 19 years of Jesus' life that are unaccounted for in the New Testament. According to publisher Sterling/Watkins, the book takes an impartial look at the extensive evidence in Islamic, Indian and Tibetan sources to find a definitive answer to this question. Sterling/Duncan Baird will also be publishing a text based on a religious figure. Teachings of the Buddha: The Wisdom of the Dharma, from the Pail Canon to the Sutras by Desmond Biddulph and Darcy Flynn combines stories and insights from the Buddha's teachings with inspirational imagery. **— Juan Martinez**

Books Mentioned in This Feature

The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment by Eckhart Tolle. New World Library, $22.95, Sept. 1999. ISBN 978-1-57731-152-2.

A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose by Eckhart Tolle. Dutton, $24.95, Oct. 2005. ISBN 978-0-525-94802-5.

Guardians of Being by Eckhart Tolle and Patrick McDonnell. New World Library, $18, Oct. ISBN 978-1-57731-671-8.

The 2012 Story: The Myths, Fallacies, and Truth Behind the Most Intriguing Date in History by John Major Jenkins. Tarcher, $25.95, Oct. ISBN 978-1-58542-766-6.

2012 and Beyond: An Invitation to Meet the Challenges & Opportunities Ahead by Diane Cooper. Findhorn, $TBD, Jan. 2010. ISBN 978-1-84409-182-9.

The Complete Prophecies of Nostradamus by Mario Reading. Sterling/Watkins, $29.95, Oct. ISBN 978-1-4027-7171-2.

Ouija Answer Book: Look into the Future. Have Fun! by Hasbro. Sterling/Innovation, $9.95 paper, Sept. ISBN 978-1-4027-6747-0.

Fringe Dweller on the Night Shift: True Stories from an Afterlife Paramedic by Monica Holy. Weiser, $16.95 paper, Oct. ISBN 978-1-57863-468-2.

Journey to the Light: Find Your Spiritual Self and Enter into a World of Infinite Opportunity: True Stories from Those Who Made the Journey by George Noory and William J. Birnes. Forge, $24.99, Nov. ISBN 978-0-7653-2103-9.

Living Life as a Thank You: The Transformative Power of Daily Gratitude by Mary Beth Sammons. Viva, $15.95, Nov. ISBN 978-1-57344-368-5.

Blessings: Reflections on Gratitude, Love and What Makes Us Happy by the editors of Good Housekeeping. Sterling/Hearst, $12.95, Nov. ISBN 978-1-58816-780-4.

Memories of the Afterlife: Life Between Lives, Stories of Personal Transformation, edited by Michael Newton. Llewellyn, $17.95 paper, Oct. ISBN 978-0-7387-1527-8.

Be the Change: How Meditation Can Transform You and the World by Ed and Deb Shapiro. Sterling/Ethos, $19.95, Nov. ISBN 978-1-4027-6001-3.

I See Your Dream Job: A Career Intuitive Shows You How to Discover What You Were Put on Earth to Do by Sue Frederick. St. Martin's, $19.99, Sept. ISBN 978-0-312-55420-0.

Unfinished Evolution: How a New Age Revival Can Change Your Life and Save the World by Teena Booth. Scotalyn, $19.95, paper, Nov. ISBN 978-0-615-22972-0.

How the World Is Made: The Story of Creation According to Sacred Geometry by John Michell. Inner Traditions, $35, Oct. ISBN 978-1-59477-324-2.

When Jesus Lived in India: The Quest for the Aquarian Gospel: The Mystery of the Missing Years by Alan

Jacobs. Sterling/Watkins, $19.95 paper, Aug. ISBN 978-1-906787-29-5.

Teachings of the Buddha: The Wisdom of the Dharma, from the Pail Canon to the Sutras by Desmond Biddulph and Darcy Flynn, photos by John Cleare. Sterling/Duncan Baird, $14.95, Sept. ISBN 978-1-84483-818-9.

A version of this article appeared in the 09/28/2009 issue of *Publishers Weekly* under the headline: